

FIRST UP BEST DRESSED

BERTINE MALLORY sat up in bed and giggled. From the cot on the farther side of the room a cross contralto voice inquired: "What's the merry jest?"

"Look at the clock."

A tousled, dark head lifted from the pillow.

"What about it?"

"It's noon."

"Who cares?"

"I do. You do. We've got breakfast beat. So much to the good."

"Lunch?" queried the blonde with pessimistic intonation.

Bertine giggled again. When Bertine Mallory giggled, you wanted to kiss her. "I used to have stomach," she chuckled. "All gone. This Chicago ain't did it. As a banting diet it can't be beat."

"Yes; when you're thin you look like a little red-and-gold angel. But I'm getting scrawny. How's I going to manage today with nothing inside me but a yearn?" moaned Mildred. "The fellow sufferer." Bertie, the show's a flop. It'll be lucky if it lasts out the week."

"Where does that leave us?"

"Looking for another job."

"It's a punk season, and we haven't got the clothes to make a front before a manager."

"Between us we have," Bertine pointed out. "You can take the rig out for the air one day, and I the next."

"Collars and cuffs." I played the fresh servant girl until this thing razed me out of the part. Haven't had a decent job since."

"But outside of that?"

"Some smart friend of Sid Rankine, who wrote the play, sent it to him. Wanted the part herself, very likely. Sid passed it on to the manager, and he passed it on to me with a fresh grin and my notice. He didn't like me, anyway, because well, just one of those because."

Mildred nodded her comprehension.

"Were you good in the part?"

"I was rotten," giggled Bertine. "But I could have worked into it."

Mildred referred again to the paper: "What's a fope?"

"That's part of the jinx. I'm keeping it till I find out. Something French, though it's no word I ever came across."

"Throw the thing away," implored the other.

"I'm going to hang on to it," averred Bertine decisively, "until I meet the perfect lady that wrote it. And then I'm going to make her eat it!" she declared with ferocity.

"That'll chase the jinx."

"How do you know it's a her?"

"By the catty sound of it. What we're going to wear tonight?"

"Looks like gingham."

"What do you think Tommy is pulling? A fancy-dress party? No, ma'am. When we go to the theater, you brace Mrs. Walfall for the blue satin and the hat that you wear in the last act. You'll be knockout."

"What about you?"

"Keep your eye on the good old black satin." She exhumed that garment from the wardrobe and began to rip out the sleeves with soft fingers. "How to turn afternoon into evening," she remarked, performing some manipulations in the region of the neck. "Turned inside out and fused up with some trimmings, this'll—er—create a marked impression as one of the new creeps that have just hit New York this season."

"You're a marvel, Bertie. But you can't wear a straw hat with that outfit."

"Can't?" She dived into a drawer and emerged with another specimen of black satin, which she proceeded to adjust over the straw.

"With a bit of ruffle, which your new chemise is going to lend me by request, and the cigarette, if Ethel ever comes back with it—ah, madam! You get that blue satin if you want to keep up with the parade."

"First up best dressed," pronounced the newcomer jauntily. "Girls, I've landed."

"No! What's the part?"

"How much in it?"

"Not so bad for a bum season. Seventy-five per cent. It's a last-minute fill-in. Got in on the clothes and the bluff. That's the way to land a job in bad times, my infants. How much have you got on hand?"

"The treasurer reports two dollars and forty-nine cents."

"And the ghost walks Saturday?"

"Maybe."

"Well, you've got to make it go. I'll send back some out of the first wad I lay my claws on. No advance yet except my ticket to Peoria for Sunday night."

"Couldn't you hook it for a mess of frankfurters and catch a ride on a truck?" suggested Bertine.

"You're looking for easy feed. Manderson's been inquiring for Millie and you."

"Manderson? That crooked shyster lawyer?"

"I suppose he is about as crooked as they make 'em," conceded Ethel. "And I wouldn't be seen dead with him, myself, on Broadway," Bertine averred. "But in Chicago—who knows?"

"They say he's a bear with a menu card," murmured Mildred.

"I'm not that hungry," snapped Bertine.

"Tad Wilbur's in town, too," pursued Ethel, looking at Bertine.

"You've been seeing 'em all, haven't you?" observed the girl with rather obvious carelessness.

"Quite a few. He wanted to know where he could find you."

"You didn't tell him?"

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